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A FOREST FIRE IN NORTHERN WISCONSIN

BY JOHN L. BRACKLIN¹

I had been running a steamboat on Lake Chetak and Birch Lake in Sawyer County, Wisconsin, during the summer of 1898 and had finished my work September 25. I arrived in Rice Lake with the expectation of having a couple of weeks' rest before again taking up my duties as foreman of one of Knapp, Stout, and Company's logging camps for the winter. I had been in town one day, about long enough to get cleaned up, when I went down to the company's office to draw some money. While I was in the general office some one said: "Your father wants to see you in his office." I walked into his office and sat down. He had a map showing camp locations and other data spread out on the desk before him, which he studied for a few moments and then turned to me, saying: "John, how soon can you get ready to go to the woods?" This, as you know, could have but one answer, and that was, "Now!" "All right," he said, "I am somewhat alarmed about this long-continued dry spell and fires might spring up at any moment, and none of the camps or dams in your locality have any fire protection, such as back-firing and water-barrels at hand. Therefore I wish you would pick up a few men and whatever you might need and get up to your camp, make your headquarters there, and look after the camps in that vicinity, namely: Mulvaney's, Aronson's, Knutson's, Max Down's, Thompson's, and the old Ahern Camp on Sucker Creek."

¹The author of this narrative is a native of Rice Lake, Wisconsin. His father, James Bracklin, was for over thirty years superintendent of logging and log-driving for the Knapp, Stout, and Company lumbering corporation. Under his tutelage the son received his training for his life-calling of woodsman and lumberman. The present narrative was prepared in the form of a letter to Mr. Henry E. Knapp of Menomonie, to whom we are indebted for the opportunity to put it into print.

I swallowed the disappointment of a contemplated trip to Minneapolis to see the only girl I ever thought very much of, whom I had not seen for about eight months, and stepping over to the shipping clerk's desk, I wrote up a list of food supplies and a requisition for a team to move the same, expecting to start the following morning. I went out on the street to pick up some men and came across Lee Miller and Frank Wirth, inseparable pals, who had worked for me the previous winter. I asked them how soon they would be ready to go to the woods, and they said, "Right now." "All right," said I, "pack your sacks and be here at six in the morning, and we will load the team and go." While we were talking, another man came along, Julius Peterson by name, a hunchback, who, notwithstanding his deformity, was considered one of the best sawyers that ever felled a tree. He also was willing to start immediately, so I went over to the hotel and wrote the only girl—who, by the way, has been my wife for the past seventeen years—that I would have to defer that visit for another seven or eight months. I got my clothes packed again, and at six-thirty the following morning we were on our way to my camp at the head of Birch Lake, a distance of about thirty miles.

We arrived at Cedar Lake Dam for dinner and at camp about eight o'clock the night of September 27, 1898. We opened the door of the cook-shanty very cautiously, so as not to disturb a family of skunks who yearly took up their abode under the floors of the camps during the summer months. They did not approve of being disturbed, and from past experiences we decided not to make any unnecessary noise, such as moving tables and heavy boxes along the floors, until such time as they might be more accustomed to our presence. We built a fire in the stove and made some coffee, and after what we called a "store-feed," consisting of cheese, crackers, and sardines, we spread our blankets upon the floor to sleep as only men of that day could. We arose about five-

thirty on the morning of the twenty-eighth, had another store-breakfast, unloaded the wagon, and started the team back to town. Then the great question confronted us as to who was to do the cooking. The regular cook for the winter, Herman Gottschalk, could not be had for at least two weeks, as he was cooking for the rafting-crews at Reed's Landing. Frank Wirth finally agreed to a compromise: he was to do the cooking until such time as the first man should kick and then said man was to cook until someone else should kick, to which we all agreed.

Leaving Wirth at the camp to cook up a regular dinner, Miller, Peterson, and I left for Mulvaney's Camp to see what condition it would be in, if we had the unexpected fire. We arrived there about ten o'clock and opened up the blacksmith shop, got out empty barrels, cooking utensils, and everything that would hold water, and started Miller out to round up a couple of yokes of cattle. He returned in an hour or so with about ten head. We selected two yokes out of the bunch and, hooking them up to a breaking-plow, plowed about a dozen furrows around the camp, after which we turned them loose. They immediately started off in a westernly direction, which you may call animal instinct if you will, for we afterward found that to be the only possible direction they could have taken and evaded the fire, which unbeknown to us was so soon to follow. We sat down and smoked our pipes and joked about the unnecessary precaution of filling the barrels, as at that time it was one of the prettiest autumn days I have ever seen, not a cloud in the sky, not a breeze stirring, no sign of smoke anywhere, and no possible chance, apparently, of there ever being a fire. Nevertheless, we were carrying out instructions and we set to work to fill up the barrels, which took about an hour.

We had just filled the barrels on the roof of the long barns, when Miller, who was on top of one of the barns, called my attention to a cloud of smoke that had suddenly sprung

up on the horizon about five or six miles to the south and west of us. I climbed up on the roof of the barn, where I could get a better view. The wind suddenly arose and within ten minutes it had attained the velocity of a cyclone; what followed happened so quickly it has never as yet been quite clear to me. I can remember the black cloud settling down and in less time than it takes to write this, the fire was upon us—not on the ground as you might imagine, but in the air. The heat became terrific and the first sign of a blaze sprang up in the top of a broken stump about twenty feet in height and a hundred feet from the sleeping-shanty.

I jumped off the roof of the barn, grabbed up a water bucket, Peterson doing the same, and ran for the sleeping-shanty, a distance of about 150 feet. Before we could reach it, it was afire. We threw several buckets of water upon it, but the water might have been kerosene for all the good it did. Seeing it was useless to try to save the sleeping-shanty or the cook-shanty, which were only a few feet apart, we ran back to the barns, thinking to save them. This may sound dubious, but it all happened within twenty minutes of the time we first saw smoke four or five miles away. As quickly as we reached the barn I motioned to Miller to dump the barrels of water which we had placed there; those buildings, if you remember them, were each about sixty feet in length, standing parallel, with a hay shed between, which contained about ten tons of baled hay left over from the previous winter. While Miller ran to the far end of the barn, upsetting the six or seven barrels as he ran, Peterson and I were throwing water on the hay shed. I don't suppose we had thrown more than ten or twelve buckets when the roof of the barn took fire. As I said before, the fire seemed to be in the very air, for strange as it may seem, the dry grass and leaves around the buildings were not yet burned. In less than a minute the roof was afire from one end to the other. I motioned to Miller to jump off. He did so and ran towards

me. When he got near enough so that I could hear, he yelled: "What in hell will we do now, and which way will we go?"

Then for the first time I realized the danger we were in. A glance around showed only one way open and that was due north towards a wall of virgin green timber, a distance of about 500 yards. The ground between us and the edge of the timber had been logged the previous winter, leaving tree-tops and brush piled up here and there in great heaps—you know how it would look after being logged. How we got to the edge of the timber I can hardly remember, but in the excitement I still had the empty water-bucket in my hand. We reached the timber to find that the fire had beaten us. Perhaps a burning brand from one of the buildings had dropped just at the edge of the timber among the dry leaves and had burned a strip of ground about 200 feet in width, leaving the ground perfectly bare. Luckily for us the timber was green, with no underbrush to hold the fire, for when we reached there, there was nothing left on the ground but the smouldering ashes of the leaves. We stopped to get our breath, and then it dawned upon us how useless it was to run. I said to Miller, "If we ever get out of this, it will be by staying right here." He gave me one look, which I shall never forget, as much as to say, "Man, you are crazy," and again started to run, Peterson following. I then turned and looked back whence we had come. There was a solid wall of fire similar to a great wave, extending as far to each side as one could see and mounting fifty feet in height. It is hard to express just what my feelings were, but I remember that I ceased to be afraid, knowing that our time had come, there being not a possible chance to come out alive. The main body of the fire by that time had reached a point about where the camps had stood. I was almost tempted to start to run, when I turned to find Miller and Peterson again at my side. They had run only a short distance into the tail end of the advance fire and had come back. I remember Miller lying on

his face on the ground with his head stuck into a hole that he had dug out with his hands. The ground at the roots of the trees was damp, and the only way we could breathe was by lying on the ground, for when we stood up the heat and smoke were so thick we could not breathe.

It is interesting to hear people relate their experiences and close encounters with death. After hearing them, I can judge just how close they really have been to real death. For as I see it, it has four stages—first, the excitement; then fear; then resolution; then death itself. At about this time we had reached the point of resolve; Miller and Peterson were on their knees praying, while as for myself, notwithstanding I have lived a somewhat better life since, I concluded that as I had never asked God for anything prior to that, it was a very poor time to start in now that I was about to die. So I concluded to go just as I was, believing, as I still do, that a death-bed confession would avail me nothing. You can best realize our position when I tell you that we were never over four feet apart for at least four hours and during that period there was not one word exchanged among us. At the end of that time I was standing leaning up against a tree. Other trees were falling all around us, and as I stood there wishing one might fall on me and end it all, it started to rain. It must have poured, for before I realized what had happened I was wet to the skin. That brought me back to my senses and I realized that I was alive and that I still wanted to live. I ran a short distance and it came to me like a flash that I was going the wrong way to get out. I turned and ran back, and as I ran, stumbled over Peterson, who was still on his knees. The first word to break the dull silence of those hours was spoken then, when he said, "What in hell are you trying to do?" We made our way out to the old tote road, and after walking about a mile west, got out of the range of the fire.

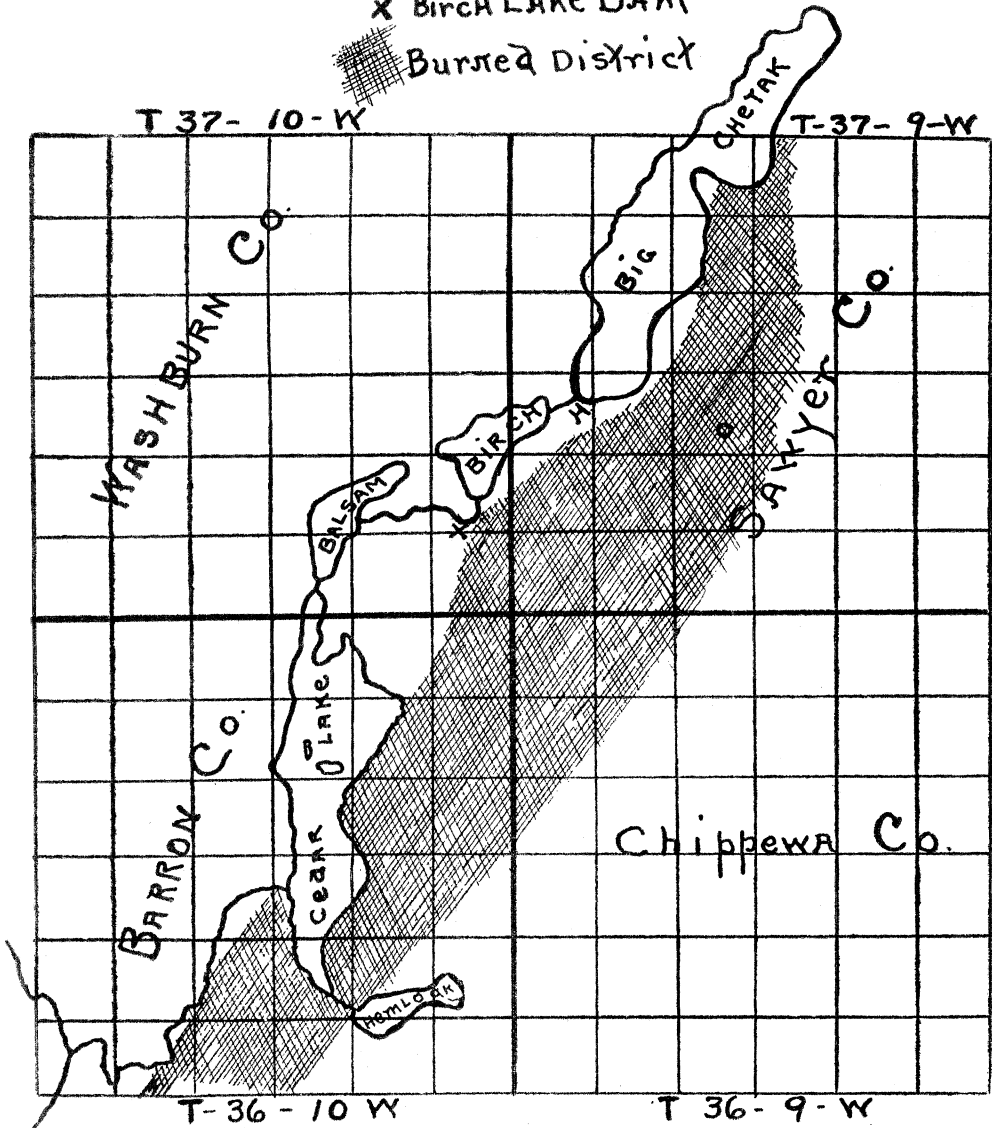
We made our way back to camp to find Wirth all excited. His greeting was, "Gee, you ought to have been here this afternoon, for everything at the dam"—meaning Birch Lake dam—"has burned, camps and all, for I could see the hay stacks as they would catch fire and the flames shoot up in the air hundreds of feet." Then the thought flashed upon me: The dam, suppose it should burn out. With an eleven-foot head of water on Birch Lake and Big Chetak, what would happen to the country below? Miller and Peterson being all in, I asked Wirth if he would go with me and try to make the dam. The rain had lasted only about half an hour and the fire, which had again got under way, but with no wind, was fortunately not burning as furiously as earlier in the day. The road to the dam took us back into the edge of the fire, but on making several detours we reached the dam to find both wings afire. Pete Null, and four or five men who had been stationed there at the Birch Lake Camp, were making a desperate fight to save the dam, but they were almost played out, having fought in vain all afternoon to save the camps.

One glance and I saw what to do. Wirth and I picked up a couple of peavies, and climbing down to the apron, ripped up four or five planks and stuck them on end down under the bed plates, or stringers, leaving them standing pointing up stream at an angle of forty-five degrees. We then climbed back upon the dam and raised the gate four or five inches. When the current struck those planks it threw a spray of water all over both wings of the dam and inside of ten minutes we had the fire completely out.

We all sat down and rested for about half an hour; then Wirth and I took a boat and rowed back to camp, a distance of about two miles. When we reached there, about midnight, the rain set in and it rained until noon the following day. Miller and Peterson were still unable to move around much, as their faces and hands were badly blistered and their

○ The Place
H MY CAMP
X Birch Lake Dam

■ Burned District



MAP PREPARED BY MR. BRACKLIN TO ILLUSTRATE HIS NARRATIVE

eyes pained them terribly. As for myself, aside from being unable to speak above a whisper, I was in pretty good shape, and knowing it would only be a couple of days until father, as soon as he could reach us, would be there to look the situation over—plans for the coming winter of logging would have to be changed to include all the timber that had been burned, for in that country a tree though slightly burned would be worm-eaten inside of a year unless cut—I started out with Wirth the next morning to find, if we could, just how far the fire had extended east and west and to look up a site for a camp to replace the Mulvaney Camp which had burned. We found that the fire had taken a course similar to that of a cyclone, about three miles in width and about twenty miles in length, extending from a point four miles south and west of Cedar Lake Dam, crossing the narrows between Cedar Lake and Hemlock up the east shore of Cedar Lake to a point about opposite Stout's Island, and then north to the shores of Big Chetak just west of the Aronson Camp in Section 4—in all an area of about seventeen miles in length and two to four miles in width.

Father and L. S. Tainter arrived the next day and after looking over the site for the new camp we came back to the scene of our experience of a few days before. We had about reached the point when father turned to me saying, "John, did I understand you to say you were here during this fire?" I answered "Yes." He looked at me for a moment with, you will remember, that peculiar squint of his and then he said, "John, you lie, for no man could have been here when this fire passed and lived to tell the tale." Nevertheless we were there, and are still living.